

## **A Crowded and Complex Picture: Local Elections in Italy**

**Article by Marina Adami**

September 30, 2021

**After being postponed due to the pandemic, local elections are set to take place in many Italian municipalities in October, including in some of the country's largest cities. The result of the race in two cities in particular, Rome and Milan, could have a significant impact on the country's politics as a whole. Marina Adami sheds light on some of the complexities of the Italian political landscape, marked by shifting alliances, controversial candidates, and changing fortunes for the parties.**

In October, Italians will go to the polls. Not all Italians, but those who live in the 1349 municipalities that are electing mayors and city council members, among them 20 regional capitals including Naples, Bologna, Turin, Milan, and Rome. In the complex theatre of Italian politics, these elections offer an insight into the popularity of the political parties in contention, a test before the next general election, scheduled for 2023. They also highlight the divisions in a country whose regional identities are still deeply entrenched and whose metropolitan centres sometimes clash with the more conservative rural areas that surround them.

Italian mayors are elected for five-year tenures. The results of the upcoming elections will shape the country for years to come and must not be treated as unimportant. Many elements that affect day-to-day life for most Italians are in play, including transport, city planning, and public goods at the local level. The tourism industry, which according to the most recent pre-pandemic data is worth around 93 million euro per year, also depends on many factors under the control of city councils. Mayors have power over decisions concerning the upkeep of city centres, initiatives like city Wi-Fi, local environmental protection, and the preservation of natural spaces. Practical decisions made by the council executive may have a great impact in making a municipality more attractive to tourists and supporting the many Italians whose livelihoods depend on them.

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### **What to expect**

The elections, originally planned for spring this year but postponed due to the pandemic,

will consist of a first round of voting on 3 and 4 October in most regions, with a second round on 17 and 18 October. Regions with special status, which are afforded more autonomy, may have different dates. Second-round voting is necessary in municipalities of up to 15,000 residents if two candidates draw for first place, and in municipalities of over 15,000 residents if no candidate wins an absolute majority. People can vote directly for their chosen mayoral candidate, or indirectly by voting for a councillor list tied to a mayoral candidate. In municipalities of over 150,000, it is also possible to place separate votes for a councillor list and a mayoral candidate that are not connected.

Many mayoral candidates and councillor lists will be supported by one or more political parties. The Italian political scene is notorious for its many parties and complex coalitions at the national level, and this also applies to the local level. Especially in the larger municipalities, parties often present a joint mayoral candidate. The typical case would see a centre-right candidate supported by the populist Lega, the national-conservative Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy) and the liberal conservative Forza Italia (Forwards Italy), sometimes joined by smaller parties; and a centre-left candidate supported by the Italy's largest centre-left party, the social-democratic PD (Democratic Party) and former prime minister Matteo Renzi's liberal Italia Viva (Italy Alive), along with smaller parties like the pro-EU Europa+. The Italian Greens never had as much mainstream popularity or electoral success as some of their European counterparts, and merged in July 2021 into a new party, Green Europe, generally aligned with the centre-left. Into the mix also comes the populist Five Star Movement, currently suffering a decline in popularity following the swift rise that saw it become a major national player only a few years after its founding in 2009.

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The large, nationally recognisable centre-right and centre-left coalitions can usually count on broad support for their candidates, although popular independents or candidates from small parties can still harm their chances in individual municipalities by splitting the vote. Small parties are also not to be ignored: the success of the Lega and Five Star Movement over the past decade has shown that minor players can swiftly become opponents to watch for the more established parties.

Not all these parties will bring forward candidates for mayor or lists for city council seats for every municipality. In smaller ones particularly, it is more likely that an independent mayoral candidate will run than one from a minor party, as well as several "civic lists" of citizens rallying around locally significant issues.

The national significance of regional elections has increased in recent years, with comparisons drawn between the local votes and the US mid-terms as a way for voters to express their opinions on how the government parties are doing. The spotlight will thus be on Mario Draghi's wide coalition, particularly its largest members: the Five Star Movement, PD, Lega, Forza Italia, and Italia Viva. As the largest party in opposition, Fratelli d'Italia will

also be paying close attention.

The vote could see a further shift in the balance of power in the centre-right camp, as Matteo Salvini's Lega seems to be wavering following the surge of popularity that brought it into government in 2018, with right-wing voters flocking to Fratelli d'Italia. Its leader, Giorgia Meloni, is fast replacing Salvini as the face of the Italian right, with speculation that her rising visibility may soon win her the title of the country's first female prime minister. If the results of the successive rounds of voting in October consolidate this trend, it may spell trouble for Salvini.

For the Left, it will be the first electoral test of Enrico Letta's leadership following the former prime minister's election as PD Secretary in March 2021. Letta seemed to be moderating expectations in July when he said: "You vote for the municipalities, not on national issues, or anything else." Despite this and the recent struggles among Italy's wider centre-left camp to cultivate a nationwide enthusiastic voter base to rival the Right's, it does seem to be performing well in the mayoral races of Italy's most influential cities.

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### **Milan: a liberal metropolis?**

Milan, the metropolitan centre of Italy's wealthy, industrial north is one of the mayoral races to watch. The importance of Milan to Italy is hard to overestimate: it is the second city in terms of population size, the first in terms of GDP. It is internationally recognised for its finance, fashion, universities, and football clubs. The mayor of Milan has power over how the city, and thus the country it represents to many outsiders, is perceived. Moreover, its role in the national political theatre is a varied one. It has been governed by centre-left mayors for the past 10 years and has a reputation as a liberal and international city, yet it is also the home of right-wing populist leader Matteo Salvini, and Lombardy, the region it heads, was one of the northern birthplaces of Lega.

Incumbent Mayor Giuseppe "Beppe" Sala is facing off against centre-right candidate Luca Bernardo, a medical doctor and relative political beginner, in what appears to be a two-horse race. Sala is a former independent now aligned with Green Europe and supported by the centre-left. Until recently, he seemed to have a slim lead but has now pulled ahead of his main opponent, with around 46.2 per cent to the centre-right's 42.5 per cent, according to analysis published in September by pollster BiDiMedia. This even suggests a chance of winning an absolute majority in the first round if his predicted share of the vote continues to rise, although this is unlikely.

The Five Star Movement candidate, Layla Pavone, is trailing behind with 4.7 per cent, a marked decline in popularity for a major party that won twice that share of the vote in Milan in the last local elections five years ago. Other candidates score even lower.

Sala, who has been dubbed the “influencer mayor” for his prolific use of social media, is using his campaign to appeal to a modern, liberal, and young audience. Using the slogan (and hashtag) *Milano sempre più Milano*, “Milan always more Milan,” Sala calls for the city to lean into its identity and become “simpler, greener, more connected, fairer, more international.”

Bernardo, on the other hand, is a very different character. Officially named as the centre-right candidate in July, his only previous involvement in politics was as a candidate on former mayor Letizia Moratti’s list in 2006.

Bernardo’s campaign has focused on his identity as a “civic candidate” and on his medical background as a strength. “Milan is very ill, it has many illnesses and I believe a doctor is needed to cure it,” he told television network 7Gold.

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Despite being aligned with Lega, which has often taken a hard line against immigration, Bernardo has also recognised Milan’s diversity. When asked about Lega’s popular slogan, he said: “Italians first? Milan is inclusive, it doesn’t distinguish on the basis of colour or ethnicity.”

His campaign has not been all smooth sailing however: the candidate has made headlines with controversies that have sparked strong criticism from his political opponents. On 13 August, he said he does not “make a distinction between people who are fascist or anti-fascist, against this or against that.” He added, “I don’t define myself as A or B or Z, I define myself as a citizen of Milan, which means being open and liberal.” After being challenged by Sala and several other centre-left politicians over his comments, Bernardo said: “I am anti-fascist as I believe all Italians are.”

This was not the first time Bernardo had faced criticism. In July, he admitted to entering a hospital’s paediatric department carrying his legally owned gun. Bernardo said he had not taken the weapon into the wards and denied any wrongdoing, claiming his critics did not understand what his permits allow him to do.

It is now widely expected that Sala will be re-elected, whether in the first round or in direct competition with Bernardo in the second round. However, for most of the campaigning period, the two were very close, an indication of the strength of the centre-right, a force to be reckoned with in the metropolis as well as in rural areas.

## **Rome: split votes and the decline of the Five Star Movement**

After the 2016 round of local elections, Italy was talking about Virginia Raggi, the newly elected mayor of Rome. Raggi was the first woman to hold that title, as well as the first mayor from the Five Star Movement. Five years on, however, Raggi and her party have lost

popularity, and, occupying fourth place in the polls, her re-election appears unlikely.

Raggi's tenure as mayor saw major issues around the city's famously inefficient waste disposal system, a problem that has not yet been fully resolved. In response to questions during her campaign, Raggi blamed the problems around waste on mismanagement by her predecessors and a lack of waste disposal facilities in the wider region. A "Redevelopment Plan" (*Piano di Risanamento*) aiming to improve the existing system has been enacted. The city is providing hundreds of millions of euros to Ama, the public firm that manages Rome's waste collection, treatment, recycling, and disposal. Any benefits reaped by the plan, however, may come about too late for Raggi.

The Five Star Movement as a whole has also seen a considerable drop in support. Since emerging as the nation's largest party in the 2018 parliamentary election, its popularity has declined with the party dropping to fourth place in terms of national parliament voting intention, behind Fratelli d'Italia, Lega, and PD.

Rome is an example of what happens when the parties that make up the large centre coalitions fail to find an agreement: the centre-left vote is split between the PD candidate, Roberto Gualtieri, and the former member of PD, civic candidate and MEP Carlo Calenda, supported by Italia Viva. Although centre-right candidate Enrico Michetti is leading the race, his predicted vote share is lower than that of Calenda and Gualtieri combined. Gualtieri, Calenda, and Raggi appear in that order after Michetti, all within a few percentage points of each other.

The second election round, likely to take place since Michetti's lead is currently far from securing an absolute majority, will most likely be between Michetti and Gualtieri. In this case, the split centre-left vote is expected to unite behind Gualtieri. BiDiMedia found that 35 per cent of Romans believe their next mayor will be Gualtieri, regardless of whom they intend to vote for.

However, everything could still change. A poll conducted by SWG on behalf of television channel La7 found 19 per cent of voters are still undecided. This group could still shift the chances of any of the four leading candidates towards victory.

As the election campaigns of Rome and Milan show, predictions are difficult to make in a crowded and complex political scene. Local elections are particularly prone to swift changes in the fortune of candidates, who themselves are often only loosely connected to political parties. However, the results that October will bring will have repercussions for the parties and will be used as an indicator of their popularity, regardless of the local nature of the voting. Despite the centre-left's good chances in Rome, Milan, and other important cities, nationally, the centre-right remains dominant, with Fratelli d'Italia and Lega in close competition as the most popular party. Critical wins in large cities could boost the Italian Left, or it could remain a local phenomenon. For the centre-right, the election could further propel Fratelli d'Italia to the forefront of the national stage, but also raise the question of their coalition's unexpectedly poor performance in Milan and other metropolitan centres. For the Italians heading to the polls, these elections will set the stage for what the next half a decade will look like in their towns and cities and may decide who they vote for in 2023.

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Published September 30, 2021

Article in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/a-crowded-and-complex-picture-local-elections-in-italy/>

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